

A Portrait of HM2 Bobby Ray, Heroic “Doc” of Liberty Bridge

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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Date: 11.19.2021

Posted: 11.19.2021 09:58

News ID: 409679

In the early morning of March 19, 1969, a Marine combat base at Phu Loc 6 near An Hoa, Vietnam, became the scene of a surprise enemy attack. As the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltrated the camp's barbed wire perimeter, a 24-year old corpsman named Bobby Ray charged into the melee to render emergency aid to the mounting casualties. He even fought off an attack of two NVA soldiers before he himself was wounded. Despite heavy loss of blood, Ray managed to crawl through the barrage of enemy fire to assist another fallen Marine, shielding him from a grenade blast. In the act of saving this Marine's life Ray ultimately sacrificed his own. The following year, Bobby Ray—or as he is better known to us today, David Robert Ray—was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

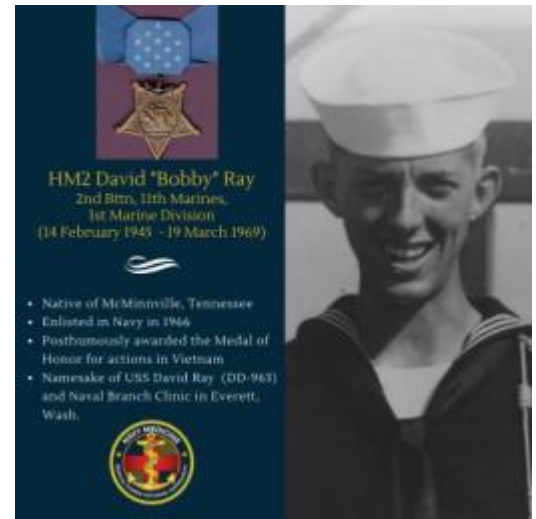
Today if you Google “David Robert Ray” you will come across a portrait showing a gangly, smiling youth in service dress and a “Dixie Cup” hat. Taken at Hospital Corps School San Diego, Calif., in October 1966, it is a heavily cropped image that conceals the fact that at 6'6 Ray towered over his classmates and he typically shied away from getting his photograph taken.

To look back on Ray's life in 1966 most would say he was destined for great things. There is no question that in his formative years the native of McMinnville, Tenn., built an impressive resume of accomplishments. He had been a Boy Scout, a skilled trombonist, vice president of his senior high school class, member of his pep squad and star of his school's golf team. Those who knew him best would recall his sophisticated taste in music, love of books, natural charisma and a sense of service. Ray was awarded a scholarship to the University of Tennessee in 1963, but this same sense of service weighed heavily on him. In his junior year he left school to join the Navy, enlisting on March 23, 1966.

After boot camp and Corps School in San Diego, Ray received orders for the USS Haven (AH-12)—then moored in Long Beach, Calif., and serving as a station hospital. A tour of Naval Hospital Long Beach followed. It was in 1968 while at Long Beach that Ray learned of the Tet Offensive and the growing challenges in Vietnam. Several of his classmates from Corps School had already deployed to theater with Marine units and Ray too wanted to do his part. He requested transfer to the Field Medical Service School (FMSS) in Camp Pendleton, Calif., and after graduating on June 25, 1968, was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division (Reinforced) destined for Vietnam.

First impressions are forged early in Marine units and those who served alongside Ray took note of his dedication and great humility. His battery commander later related that when you were as tall as Ray, had a southern drawl and were serving with the Marines “you know you're in for some rough kidding. . . [but he would] just smile and shake his head, taking it all in stride.”

Ray performed his duties as his unit's “life line” with great pride earning their respect while on patrol and on each successive “search and destroy” operation. As his tour in Vietnam came to a close Ray requested an extension which was granted on March 4, 1969. Just two weeks later he was part of a mission to protect Liberty Bridge, a strategic supply artery across the Thu Bon River connecting An Hoa to Da Nang. This bridge had been a prime



target for the Viet Cong and it would be destroyed and rebuilt many times over throughout the war. It was attacked again on the morning of March 19th, setting the stage for Ray's heroic actions that would ultimately punctuate his life.

Over the years Ray would be memorialized as the namesake of a missile destroyer (DD-971), medical clinics in Camp Pendleton, Calif., Quantico, Va., and Everett, Wash., a Bachelor Enlisted Quarters in Camp Pendleton, and an elementary school in his hometown of McMinnville, Tenn.

Today, if you visit any Navy medical command you will find Ray's portrait proudly exhibited among the 28 pictures of hospital corpsmen, physicians and dentists who have each been awarded the Medal of Honor. For those of us in the Navy Medical Department these individuals are symbols of service and sacrifice in the most trying moments of our history and standard-bearers for what one Medal of Honor recipient later described as acts of "true spirit [and] determination."

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David Ray Medal of Honor Citation. BUMED Archives.